

Editorial: Kan Man calls it 'payback time'

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You could say, based on what happened the other day, that the "Kan Man" needs no introduction.

Folks attending the 21st annual People Helping People awards luncheon in Sacramento were surprised to see that before the emcees finished listing his contributions and introducing him, the Kan Man bounded up to the stage. It was his time in the spotlight, and you had to imagine his thinking was that wasting a minute would be as knuckleheaded as wasting a soda can.

When you look around for good news in the region, you can't help but smile about the self-proclaimed Kan Man.

He's 78-year-old Gordon Christensen of Fair Oaks, this year's recipient of the Unsung Hero award. He was the winner among 16 people nominated for "a deed or significant service that has gone unrecognized," according to Nancy Findeisen, CEO of the Community Services Planning Council, which hosts the awards. Christensen "truly exemplified the unsung hero," she said, taking a simple task like collecting cans and turning it "into something dramatic."

It all started with bad news back in 1998.

Christensen's doc gave him the verdict: diabetes. The retired sheet-metal worker in the heating and air conditioning business and grandfather of 12 had to begin exercising, three miles a day.

"I thought, 'If I'm going to walk, I might as well do something worthwhile,' " he says. "It's a good way of paying back to the good Lord. It's payback time."

He started in Fair Oaks Park, collecting bottles and cans and turning them in for money. After 2 1/2 years, he made his first \$1,000 and began his decade-long devotion to donating recycling and garage sale proceeds to children's organizations, from Shriners Hospitals for Children Northern California to the River Oak Center for Children in Carmichael, among others.

"I don't get one nickel out of it. Never have and never will," Christensen says.

His Unsung Hero nomination came from the River Oak Center for Children, a mental health services provider that serves children mainly from troubled backgrounds and "low-income, high-

risk moms." The center estimates that Christensen has raised \$50,000 to \$55,000 for local children.

"The Kan Man never takes a 'cut' from the money earned to cover his cost of gas, trash bags, or wear and tear on his vehicle. He is adamant that every cent go to children," according to the nomination letter.

"He's a sweetheart," says the center's Alice Gentry. She met him at a park in 2002 when he asked for cans. "The relationship has just blossomed ever since," she says.

Instead of simply handing over money, Christensen likes to meet the staff, sometimes accompanied by children, at stores to buy gifts that are "incentives" for children to work hard and earn points to be able to receive a gift such as a stuffed animal, a notebook or a hair doodad.

"It teaches the children you have responsibilities in life, and if you want something, you have to work for it," Christensen says. Many times he has seen "all these little kids that are really suffering" – burned children awaiting surgery and foster kids. "You can't believe the expression on their face" when they receive a gift, he says.

Christensen is the son of a longshoreman known to drink and brawl. "My dad and mom gave me a roof over my head, and that's all. And food." But in the end, he cared for his father, even after their having gone 10 years without speaking.

Could that be the reason he wants to help children "100 percent"?

"Never occurred to me," he says, pausing. "But there's some truth to that. Maybe that's why I feel for kids like I do because I had such a hard time coming up."

The Kan Man's philosophy is a simple one: "We need to be there for one another."